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ABSTRACT

This booklet reflects the past 10 year's thoughts and experiences and presents the current debate concerning multicultural early childhood education, as experienced by the Lady Gowrie Child Centre, in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. The booklet describes how the center experienced the satisfying process of change and growth with such a program and realized that broader perspectives were needed to encompass the full range of diversity manifested by a truly multicultural classroom. Staff at the center found that the difficulty with the current thrust of multicultural education is that it does not sufficiently address the need for critical thinking nor develop skills for challenging bias within Australia. An early childhood program should be provided that incorporates the positive intent of multicultural education while avoiding the dangers of a tourist approach and to offer a more inclusive education that embraces gender, disability, and class issues by directly addressing the impact of stereotype, bias, and discriminatory behavior on young children. The booklet concludes with a multicultural resource center list. (AP)

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EXPLORING DIVERSITY:

REFLECTIONS TEN YEARS ON

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Pam Schurch
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Photographs: Lady Gowrie Child Centre, Sydney.
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EXPLORING DIVERSITY:
REFLECTIONS TEN YEARS ON

Pam Schurch and Elizabeth Hopson

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INTRODUCTION

In 1979 the staff of the Lady Gowrie Child Centre in Sydney were invited to present their thoughts and experiences at the end of their first year's involvement in multicultural early childhood education. These appeared in a Resource Booklet published by the Australian Early Childhood Association, entitled ***Sharing our Differences: developing a multicultural programme*** (No. 2, 1979).

Since then, ten years of discovery, effort, enjoyment and reappraisal of attitudes have gone by, as we have worked our way through a series of stages (often with the uncomfortable sense of not quite being on the right track) to the point at which we now stand.

During the course of this evolutionary process — and greatly helped by our own learning experiences and errors, by extensive reading, and by productive discussion with local and overseas experts in the field — we have come to recognise **four significant misconceptions** in relation to multicultural early childhood education practices . . . .

These are that:

- Multicultural education should be fact-focussed, and teach about countries, maps, cities, flags and typical artifacts.
- Multicultural education is only appropriate when there are children of varying cultural backgrounds present.
- Multiculturalism is a set of activities added onto an existing programme.
- There is one set of culture-based learning experiences universally appropriate to all early childhood programmes.

In a later segment of this booklet, the alternatives to the above misconceptions will be discussed.

Goals which were set out in the 1979 booklet — and which were taken from Al Grassby's paper (1979), *It's time for Migrant Education to go* — are still valid, but have expanded with our realisation that the perspective labelled 'multicultural education' is broader than the name implies. As stated by Patricia Ramsey (1987), in her book *Teaching and Learning in a Diverse World*, it encompasses many dimensions of diversity in the human race besides culture: race, occupation, socio-economic status, age, gender, sexual orientation, and various physical traits and needs.

It is relevant to all children even those living in distinctly homogeneous groups.

It extends beyond the boundaries of a country, in the belief that positive attitudes and relationships among people can have an impact on the world.

OUR MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVE — A PROCESS OF CHANGE AND GROWTH

In the early days of our involvement in multicultural early childhood education, we had much enthusiasm and commitment, but considerable uncertainty about what we should be teaching, and how to go about teaching it.

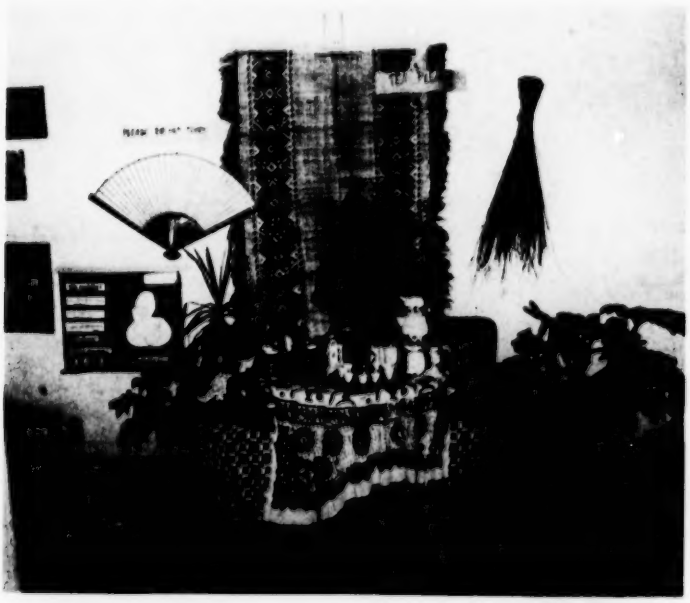
Looking back, it is apparent that we passed through three distinct stages, from each of which we have retained aspects of value and worth, while discarding others.

We feel no guilt over this as in the initial stages of a process, it is just so easy, safe, and natural to grasp and make use of, the obvious in a culture.

The three stages of growth

We began by adopting what could be called a 'show and tell' approach, in a beginning attempt to honour cultural uniqueness, to raise self-esteem among children of varied backgrounds, and to involve parents.

We invited children and parents to bring in objects from their cultures for discussion during group times; for the children to pass around and look at; or for display on a table, with background posters and books appropriate to that culture.



In the second stage, we noted and celebrated holidays, or days of special significance to families or staff, with an 'occasion' in which everyone joined. At the end of Ramadan, for instance, our Turkish worker brought in a group of Turkish children in sumptuous costumes, who danced most beautifully. Special and traditional Turkish food was offered, as well as tea in glasses, poured from a Samovar. It was interesting, exciting, and stimulating.

We spent whole weeks, in the lead-up to some special day, shopping for, and cooking the foods relevant to that culture, learning songs in that language (with parent help), and exploring the dances, to music on the tape recorder.

We also spent much time and effort in creating an environment (both in the children's playrooms and in the entrance hall and passages) which reflected many different cultures, and bore signs and messages in many languages.

The Home Corner

Our home corner was plentifully supplied with dress-up clothes for dramatic play. We had shoes from Africa, Turkey, Japan and China; our dolls had skin tones which ranged from pink to sallow to black; there were cooking implements and crockery used in a variety of cultures.

We were proud of the many books we had which featured dark-skinned families but ... still we felt dissatisfaction niggling at us.

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When the special week or event we had been celebrating was behind us, we often felt, uncomfortably, that we had made a superficial and fleeting 'journey' into another world, the door to which we had shut firmly as we left.

Were we really helping the children to grasp the reality of other lifestyles, in ways sufficiently down to earth and familiar to them?

We knew that children learn best through direct interaction with the people, objects and events in their environment, and that they learn most easily, and with lasting effect, when learning is personalised and directly related to their own experience.

And so we came to realise, more and more, that the concept of diversity is best absorbed through real-life exploration of the many different ways in which real people, known to the children, carry out familiar activities, speak, or seek to meet a human need.

In the third stage, as a result of our own careful evaluation and after reading about the experiences of others, further along the trail than ourselves, we have tried each day to weave relevant aspects of people's lifestyles into the children's lives.

They have opportunities to try out what it is like:

- To put their dolls to bed in a tubular Turkish hammock; a hanging Bangladeshi basket bed; or a hanging Turkish cloth cradle with it's particularly Turkish sheet and pillows . . . just as our babies are put to bed at the Centre, in baby-sized versions.

A Bangladeshi basket bed

- To carry their dolls in Thai baby carriers, or in the Zulu way, strapped onto their backs with small blankets.
- To be carried themselves in an Indonesian baby sling.
- To eat a variety of 'breakfasts', Greek, Turkish, Uruguayan, Assamese — tasting particular flavours, and using eating utensils or fingers — often sitting on floor cushions to eat from a low round table, and, in the case of the Turkish meal, with laps covered by a special large cloth which goes under the table, and then up and over the laps of the participants — to collect any crumbs!
- To visit the shops to buy ingredients for a particular Turkish dish, Güvec, carrying special, deep woven baskets from Turkey — and then cook the meat and vegetable stew in a heavy clay pot made for this very purpose, ready for lunch.

Preparing for an Indonesian Meal

- To have their faces beautifully decorated in the traditional Indian way.
- To watch a baby enjoy a relaxing Indian baby massage, with sweet-smelling Indian spices and oils.
- To learn how to fold, wrap and carry objects in special cloths — the way it is done in some Turkish families.
- To learn how Indian people wrap a length of material around themselves to form a garment — and then to practice it themselves, with smaller lengths cut to accommodate their smaller size.

In this third stage:

We have continued to welcome families with an environment which depicts other backgrounds, but we are now conscious of the great importance of reflecting the cultural heritage of our **own** families and staff, when selecting materials for display.

In monocultural centres, we feel it would be appropriate to choose photographs and posters relevant to those cultural groups living in Australia.

We make sure too, that enlarged photographs of the immediate neighbourhood (the community to which the children now belong) are on the walls. In a monocultural centre too, this would be important, giving the children a sense of belonging, and making them feel good about themselves and their environment.

We have cast a critical eye over our home corner realising the need to eliminate:

The exotic: i.e. costumes for festival wear, when clothing should represent the practical, work-a-day life-styles of ordinary people.

the tokenistic: i.e. dolls with white features and token skin colouring.

the stereotypic: i.e. the depiction of the Aboriginal people only as boomerang makers and spear throwers.

With these thoughts in mind, we looked critically at our books, evaluating them for racism, sexism, the lifestyles they presented, their effect on the children's self-image.

How do girls feel if stories indicate that boys perform all the brave and important deeds?

How do dark-skinned children feel when white, light and pretty colours are associated with beauty and cleanliness, and the dark colours are portrayed as evil, dirty or menacing?

We began to use brown and black to colour playdough; to have dark-coloured water in the water trough, to offer brown, black and cream paint and dark-coloured paper for painting or drawing.

During the course of all these experiences, and in fact, during most of the routine times of the day, the children hear spoken, naturally and spontaneously, languages other than English, so that not only do they begin to understand some of the oft-repeated phrases, and even acquire a small vocabulary of their own, but they get the important message — English is but one of many Australian languages.

AREAS OF GREATEST LEARNING

Perhaps we should look briefly now at the areas which have been of greatest significance to us in the learning process through which we have been — and through which we will continue to go.

- We have learned that multicultural education is relevant to every child, and particularly to those living in monocultural environments, who are denied the opportunity to become aware of different cultural groups.
- We have learned that multicultural education cannot be fact-focussed, and must in fact be action-focussed, if it is to provide the direct involvement which will make it real to young children.
- We have learned that no one set of goals for multicultural education will do. We know now that goals must vary with the socio-economic cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children and that people working in children's services must thus get to know their families personally . . . only then will parents feel the trust and confidence to become deeply involved, and to offer themselves as active contributors and participants. We know too that children from diverse backgrounds may need to learn about the similarities among people, and how to communicate with one another —and that children from a monocultural environment may need to learn about diversity within their own group, before being led to learn about the broader world.
- We have discovered the value of large, clear, child's-eye level, and frequently changed photographs as a focus for discussion.

  Photographs showing people with a wide range of skin colouration, hair texture, facial features, dress and adornment; and people in identifiable situations and expressing many different emotions are wonderfully useful for discussion — and have particular relevance if they portray children and their families currently in the Centre.
- We have found that, to have significance and worth, a multicultural perspective must be an integral, ongoing aspect of an early childhood educational programme, designed to expand awareness of the children's own, and the broader world.
- We now realise that a multicultural perspective, to be real and not generalised, should focus on individual families and the areas of their cultural heritage important to them.

  Instead of:
  'Michiko is Japanese, and the Japanese all do . . .'

  it should be:
  'Michiko is Japanese/Australian, and this is how her family lives in Australia'.

- We have learned that multicultural education is inextricably bound up with children's social orientation. Skills necessary for good interpersonal relationships are necessary for the development of good inter-group attitudes and behaviours. We recognize that children need to be helped to develop their ability to understand and accept other points of view; to develop a sense of social responsibility; to initiate and maintain interaction with others; and to broaden their range of contacts.

  We try to encourage, always, inclusionary rather than exclusionary behaviour.

- But perhaps the single most important aspect of our learning has been to look always for the 'teachable moment' — the opportunity arising, unplanned, when through conversation and discussion around an incident, a question, or even a gesture, the child's knowledge and understanding of the world can be broadened and deepened.

Look for the 'teachable' moment

Learning through our own experiences has been a satisfying process. But on reflection, through evaluation, and through reading and discussion, we are beginning to realise that even broader perspectives are needed to encompass the full range of diversity experienced by children.

CURRENT THINKING

Australia is a diverse society where distinctly different racial and cultural groups exist. However it is not a pluralistic society in which all racial and cultural groups share equal access to control over their quality of life.

Over the past few years in an attempt to teach non-English speaking background (NESB) children to feel good about themselves and proud of their cultural background, and to teach white Anglo Australian children to appreciate cultural diversity, many early childhood professionals have adopted a multicultural educational programme. The intention has been very positive; to teach children about each other's cultures so that they will learn to respect each other and so avoid developing prejudice. Whilst the intention has been praiseworthy, unfortunately it has been all too easy to fall into the trap of providing a tourist curriculum where multiculturalism for white Anglo Australian children, in particular, evolves into teaching about cultures in order to help them understand the likeness between people — the message being 'some people eat with a knife and fork, some with chopsticks, some with fingers, but we all eat'. Whilst it can be said that we have learned a lot of interesting things about cultures that we may not have known before and although it is 'right' and 'proper' to appreciate cultural differences it is time to reflect on what we have been doing. We need to ask ourselves: does the study of culture and an appreciation of cultural diversity enable all children and their families to overcome the social inequalities within Australian society? Is culture and cultural difference the problem or does the problem lie with the attitudes towards and responses to culture and cultural differences?

The difficulty with the current thrust of multicultural education is that it doesn't sufficiently address the need for critical thinking and develop skills for challenging bias within society. There is clear evidence that children notice differences in people at an early age and not only do they see differences but their ideas about them begin to reflect prevailing adult attitudes.

As Derman-Sparks (1989) says "What children learn in the preschool years greatly influences whether they grow up to value, accept and comfortably interact with diverse people or whether they will succumb to the biases that result in, or help justify, unfair behaviour of an individual because of her or his identity'.

Unfortunately we, in company with other child care workers, have learnt all too well the taboos associated with race, culture, class and disability where we have been taught not to 'see' these differences but to see only individuals. We often dismiss these differences by describing children as 'children the same the world over'. This approach, however, ignores the identity and realities of people different from the mainstream and results in a denial of young children's awareness of differences and a non-confrontation of children's misconceptions, stereotypes and discriminatory behaviours about race, culture, gender or different physical or intellectual abilities.

After a long period of reflection we feel it is time to provide an early childhood programme that incorporates the positive intent of multicultural education whilst avoiding the dangers of a tourist approach and provide a more inclusive education by embracing gender, disability and class issues by directly addressing the impact of stereotyping, bias and discriminatory behaviour on young children.

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THE ONGOING DEBATE

At Lady Gowrie as we have reflected on and seriously questioned our practice in multicultural education, we have been interested to read of similar questioning in other countries, notably the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States.

While terms such as multi-ethnic education, intercultural education, global education and cross-cultural education encompass similar meanings and conceptual frameworks, multicultural education is the term most frequently used to define the recognition of a pluralistic society into a system of education. However some educators in Australia, Canada and USA are beginning to question the phrase multicultural education as it remains unacceptable to large numbers of indigenous people in the three countries namely Aborigines, Native Americans, Canadians and Inuits.

Ramsey, Vold and Williams (1989) cite some supporters of multicultural education who find the term limiting and who prefer the designation multiracial education as it conceptually addresses the issues of institutionalised racism. Since racism is controversial and frequently arouses anger, pride and guilt, multicultural education is said to be too soft a term in its connotation, to deal with the issues of race and structural power. Multi-racial education brings these to the fore and highlights issues of discrimination and equality of access for cultural minority groups. In recent literature from the UK the terminology anti-racist in place of multicultural education is used. Educators in the UK have also questioned the term non-English speaking background (NESB) because of its negative connotation, preferring the more positive 'bilingual' or 'Urdu speaking' for example. Another issue currently debated is whether multicultural education should include gender, class, and disabilities. Some educators fear this expansion diffuses the original purpose of multicultural education, however Derman-Sparks suggests that fragmenting education into various components such as multicultural education, non-sexist education, education for disabilities fails to address the underlying structual bias within education.

As we have continued to wrestle with these very complex issues we have re-examined our use of the terminology multicultural education. In adopting the phrase cross-cultural anti-bias education we are outlining our commitment to an inclusive education which:

- addresses the diversity of all Australians i.e. culture, ethnicity, language, gender, class, physical and intellectual abilities,
- is based on children's developmental levels taking account of their sense of identity and attitudes towards themselves and others,
- directly addresses the impact of bias, stereotyping and discriminatory behaviour in young children's development and interactions.

GOALS

It is interesting to note the similarities between goals for a cross-cultural anti-bias perspective, and those relevant to good child care practice . . .

- Both place children and their families at the centre of focus.
- Both seek to provide the conditions in which children can develop to their fullest potential, free of bias and discrimination.
- Both enable all those involved, parents, children and staff, to feel valued, supported and respected.

As set out by Patricia Ramsey (1987) in her book *Teaching and Learning in a Diverse World* pp. 3-5, the goals are:

- To help children develop positive gender, racial, cultural, class and individual identities, and to recognize and accept their membership in many different groups.
- To enable children to see themselves as part of a larger society; and to identify and empathize with individuals from other groups.
- To foster respect and appreciation for the diverse ways in which other people live.
- To encourage in earliest social relationships an openness and interest in others, a willingness to include others, and a desire to co-operate.
- To promote a sense of social responsibility, and an active concern that extends beyond immediate family or group.
- To empower children to become autonomous and critical analysts with the skills that will allow them to resist and challenge bias and unfair treatment.
- To support the development of educational and social skills that are needed for children to become full participants in the larger society in ways most appropriate to individual style.

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

We are aware that most early childhood educators and parents want to protect children from the harsh realities of the world and want to postpone their exposure to unpleasantness. However when we look objectively at the children's world we realize that for most children the world is not a secure cocoon. By our reluctance to face their realities, we leave children to solve troublesome problems unaided. Most children have directly experienced rejection at some time because of their gender, physical appearance, abilities, ethnicity, language, etc., or at least witnessed their friends or family members' rejection, so if we are to encourage children's developing sense of self esteem, critical thinking and ability to stand up for themselves and others we have to teach them to say 'That's not fair', 'I don't like it when you call me names'. As Derman-Sparks (1989: 8) suggests children have the capacity for expressing hurt and for enjoying empathy and fairness . . . they have lots of experience with problem solving 'fair' and 'not fair'.

We recognize that our cross-cultural anti-bias approach must be integrated into and not tacked onto our existing programme. We anticipate that much of our existing work will remain, some ideas/activities may be modified, some new ideas developed, some ideas discarded altogether.

In developing teaching strategies to encourage children's ability to challenge stereotypes and unfair behaviour we recognize that these strategies must be based on an appropriate developmental approach. Before we design activities relevant to the children's needs, concerns and interests we first have to 'hear' what a child is asking, wants to know, means by the comments she/he is making.

We acknowledge our responsibility to create an environment where children are free to ask questions about topics which in the past may have caused us some discomfort such as questions about physical appearance, disabilities, gender. We will continue to make it a firm rule that a child's identity is not an acceptable reason for teasing or rejecting.

Our cross-cultural anti-bias approach to early childhood education is a way of interpreting behaviour and events in which diversity among individuals, cultures, gender, lifestyles is valued. Our initial approach to multicultural education was seen as a way to promote self respect and understanding amongst different ethnic groups. It has expanded to incorporate an appreciation for all differences, emphasising interpersonal relationships and a commitment and confidence to actively seek to create a better world for all.

We believe it is not possible to know all the answers before starting — we will continue to learn from our mistakes and successes. We are not frightened of making mistakes — we are more concerned at not trying.

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MULTICULTURAL RESOURCE CENTRES

VIC

Multicultural Resource Centre
Free Kindergarten Association of Victoria
383 Church Street
RICHMOND VIC 3121

Victorian Co-operative Children's Services
for Ethnic Groups
569 Nicholson Street
NORTH CARLTON VIC 3054

QLD

Brisbane Ethnic Child Care Development Unit
PO Box 557
WEST END QLD 4101

Migrant Resource Centre Townsville Ltd
PO Box 1858
TOWNSVILLE QLD 4810

Mt Isa Ethnic Community Council
West Street
MT ISA QLD 4825

SA

Network SA
95 Palmer Place
NORTH ADELAIDE SA 5006

WA

Ethnic Child Care Resource Unit
245 Churchill Avenue
SUBIACO WA 6008

TAS

Migrant Resource Centre
(Northern Tasmania) Inc
'Civic Square'
75 Cameron Street
LAUNCESTON TAS 7250

NT

Migrant Resource Centre
Cavanagh Street
DARWIN NT 0800

Playgroup's Association of the Northern Territory
PO Box 41405
CASUARINA NT 0811

ACT

Belconnen Community Service
PO Box 679
BELCONNEN ACT 2616

Migrant Resource Centre
Griffin Centre
CANBERRA CITY ACT 2601

NSW

Ethnic Child Care Development Unit
Ethnic Child Care Family Community Services
Co-Operative Ltd
13/142 Addison Road
MARRICKVILLE NSW 2204

Fairfield Multicultural Children's Resource Centre
1 Pevensey Street
CANLEY VALE NSW 2166

Newcastle Multicultural Children's Service Unit
Room 7/8 City Arcade
NEWCASTLE NSW 2300

Wollongong Children's Cultural Resource Unit
PO Box 75
WOLLONGONG EAST NSW 2500

Gowrie Resource Centre
Lady Gowrie Child Centre
Elliott Avenue
ERSKINEVILLE NSW 2043

Illawarra Migrant Resource Centre
3 Rawson Street
WOLLONGONG NSW 2500